



News Release

For Immediate Release
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Oral Health Survey Reveals Disparities Among Ethnic Groups

SALT LAKE CITY – During the fall of 2005, the Utah Department of Health (UDOH), Oral Health Program (OHP) conducted a statewide dental survey to assess the oral health status among Utah school age children in grades one through three. The survey collected information on various issues including treated or untreated tooth decay, treatment needs, sealant utilization and access to dental care (e.g., insurance type, length of time since last dental visit, and unmet dental needs).

The survey revealed persistent disparities in oral health among certain ethnic groups. Hispanic/Latino children were more likely to have dental caries, defined as treated or untreated tooth decay in primary or permanent teeth, and to be in need of urgent care than non-Hispanic/Latino children. They were also less likely to have received preventive sealants.

Poverty and a lack of dental insurance have repeatedly been shown to affect dental health status. Almost one in ten parents reported that their child needed dental care during the past year, but could not get it. The reasons most frequently cited were “couldn’t afford it” and “no insurance.” While almost ten percent of the parents surveyed, said their child did not have medical insurance, a fourth of those questioned said they did not have dental insurance.

The survey also showed that a substantial number of Utah children still suffer from dental caries. In fact, more than half of children between six and eight years of age had experienced caries. Additionally, more than one in five children had untreated caries or tooth decay.

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Furthermore, almost three percent of Utah children had urgent treatment needs. Urgent dental care is defined as a child with dental pain, abscess or extensive large caries. This means about 3,600 children attend school with dental pain/infection and are in need of urgent attention. “In my practice I see these children every day that have emergency dental needs,” said Dr. Allen Christensen, a pediatric dentist.

“While some children in Utah have never experienced a toothache or even a filling at the dentist’s office, there are children who cannot eat nutritious food, play or learn in school because of dental problems,” according to Dr. Steven J. Steed, State Dental Director.

Dental sealants are a very effective method of preventing caries and thus can significantly reduce the risk for untreated decay. However, sealants remain underused. In Utah, only 45 percent of eight year-old children screened had dental sealants.

Dental caries is a preventable disease. The OHP promotes dental caries prevention methods such as fluorides, sealants and early childhood caries intervention. There is still considerable need for improvement in the oral health status of Utah children. For more information or a copy of the complete report, contact the OHP at 801-538-9177 or visit the Web site at

<http://health.utah.gov/oralhealth>.

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The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public’s health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death, assuring access to affordable, quality health care, and promoting healthy lifestyles

Screening Survey Results

	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	All Children
Caries Experience			
None	23.7%	50.4%	44.7%
Yes	76.3%	49.6%	55.3%
 Untreated Decay			
None	62.9%	84.4%	78.6%
Yes	37.1%	15.6%	21.4%
 Treatment Urgency			
No obvious problem	62.9%	84.4%	78.6%
Early care needed	28.5%	14.5%	18.6%
Urgent care needed	8.6%	1.2%	2.8%
 Sealants			
None	77.9%	50.0%	54.9%
Yes	22.1%	50.0%	45.1%
 Toothache in the past six months			
Yes	16.8%	11.7%	12.2%
No	77.8%	87.2%	85.7%
Don't know	5.5%	1.1%	2.1%
 Needed dental care but could not get it			
Yes	21.1%	5.7%	9.6%
No	72.6%	93.1%	88.3%
Don't know	6.3%	1.3%	2.1%